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Lycanthropy and Self-Identification

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Lycanthropy, an unusual psychiatric syndrome involving the delusion of being an animal, usually occurs as a transient symptom of severe psychosis. A review of the historical and modern medical literature, as well as of contemporary anthropological reports, suggests multiple etiologies for lycanthropy, including seizure disorders and use of psychotomimetic drugs. A clinical illustration is presented in which the delusion of being an animal in human form has persisted for over 15 years and has been refractory to treatment. The authors speculate that disturbances of self-identity may combine with neurological abnormalities to produce some cases of this syndrome.

Lycanthropy, the delusion of being an animal, has been described historically but has rarely been addressed in the modern medical literature. The syndrome derives its name from the Greek myth of Lycaon, who was transformed into a wolf by Zeus. Accounts of such animal transformations, usually involving indigenous animals, have evolved in all parts of the world (Summers, 1966).

During the Middle Ages in Europe, lycanthropy was commonly ascribed to demonic possession (Lehmann, 1985). Later, during the 16th and 17th centuries, controversy centered on whether lycanthropy was the manifestation of a natural disease state or of satanic influence and witchcraft, including the use of poisons and toxic ointments (Summers, 1966; Zilborg and Henry, 1941). In support of the latter possibility, the modern physician H. J. Norman notes that witches' ointments often included potent drugs such as Atropa belladona (deadly nightshade), Hyoscyamus niger (henbane), Aconitum napellus (aconite root), and hemlock (Summers, 1966). Harner (1973), a contemporary anthropologist known for his work with the Jivaro Indians in Brazil, supports the notion of drug-induced hallucinosis due to psychotropic ingredients that could be absorbed through skin and mucous membranes. Delusions of animal transformation associated with ritualistic drug ingestion have been described by Castaneda (1968) in a Yaqui Indian shaman.

Further examples of lycanthropy are provided in descriptions of various cultures in the contemporary anthropological literature. In his study of the Bororo tribe in Brazil, Levi-Strauss (1977) described two types of shaman, to whom animal metamorphosis was ascribed: the "bari" experienced spirit possession leading to trance states and convulsions, whereas the "aroettowaraare" suffered olfactory hallucinations of decay. Their transformation into indigenous animals functioned to enhance personal power and aid others. As both types of shaman self-selected their special vocations, it seems possible that they may have experienced self-induced dissociative and hypnotic states, used psychotropic agents, or suffered seizure disorders. Finally, hallucinogenic plants such as Banisteriopsis (containing harmine, harmaline and dimethyltryptamine, and Psychotria (also containing dimethyltryptamine) are widely used by Peruvian and Brazilian Indian tribes, with frequently reported cases of lycanthropy (Harner, 1973).

By contrast, in European societies, many historical cases of lycanthropy have been presumed to represent manifestations of psychiatric disorders. Several such cases have been described by psychodynamic theorists. Jung (1928/1953) refers to a woman who later "became insane and would exhibit a sort of lycanthropy in which she crawled on all fours and imitated the grunting of pigs, the barking of dogs and the growling of bears." Deutsch (1942) describes a girl with an apparent "as if" personality disturbance, who subsequently became schizophrenic, bought a dog, and decided to imitate it in order to know how to act.

In a recent paper (Keck et al., 1988), we have summarized four reports of lycanthropy from the modern literature and have documented 12 additional cases from our center. Collectively, these 17 patients presented as wolves (five), dogs (four), cats (two), a tiger, a gerbil, a rabbit, and two unspecified animals. They occurred in conjunction with schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, major depression, organic brain syndrome, schizoid personality disorder, and "pseudoneurotic schizophrenia." Symptoms were generally transient and responded to neuroleptics, with the exception of one case reported below, in which lycanthropic delusions have lasted continuously for 15 years.

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the individual's daily core identity. The latter may incorporate complex animal relationships such as totemic animal descent or protection by a spiritual animal guardian (Levi-Strauss, 1963), while being generally human. The psychodynamic and neurophysiological etiologies for lycanthropy in traditional societies, however, may be very similar to those of some culturally dystonic lycanthropic syndromes in modern societies. Although we are unaware of any reports concerning early childhood development as it relates to animal identification or shamanism in traditional societies, such inquiries would likely shed additional light on this issue. The delusional nature of lycanthropy would appear to depend on cultural definitions of reality. Delusional content is likely determined by the general culture (Weinstein, 1962), but may also reflect variations in specific family cultures and serve a reparative function in certain individuals. This patient's persistent delusion appeared to preserve self-esteem and to provide a safe love object, although it also posed serious existential dilemmas. Finally, his case raises the question of whether brain dysfunction is a necessary (although not sufficient) condition for failure to form a human self-identification. In the presence of neurophysiological abnormalities due to organic brain syndromes, psychotomimetic drug toxicity, or "functional psychosis," this process may be more tenuous. Certainly, more case studies of lycanthropy in traditional and modern societies will be required to answer these questions.

In conclusion, although we are aware of no case comparable to this in the modern psychiatric literature, we wonder whether other cases of persistent lycanthropy may exist in our society. Lacking the cultural endorsement that they would have in many preindustrial societies, such cases may remain covert or unreported.

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